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All Christchurch parishes closed until engineers inspect them

by Michael Otto by Catholic News Service

CHRISTCHURCH, New Zealand -- No Catholic church or school in Christchurch will be used until engineers have declared it safe.

Christchurch Bishop Barry P. Jones announced the measure Feb. 25, three days after a magnitude 6.3 earthquake rocked New Zealand's second-largest city, causing more than 100 deaths and widespread damage.

The NZ Catholic newspaper reported that some churches in the quake zone were severely damaged while others escaped relatively unscathed.

Bishop-designate Charles Drennan, administrator of the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament, said safety is the primary concern. The cathedral sustained severe damage and may not be usable again, said engineers who inspected the building.

Bishop-designate Drennan, named to head the Palmerston North Diocese the day of the earthquake, and other priests were asked to leave the cathedral rectory by safety officials for security reasons as authorities cleared much of the central city.

Authorities placed the death toll at 113, with about 220 people missing Feb. 25. Among the missing were dozens of students and staff at an international English language school, which was in one of the buildings that collapsed.

Rescuers' hopes were raised that signs of life had been detected in the destroyed Holy Cross Catholic chapel in central Christchurch, but rescuers were unable to locate anyone Feb. 24.

Elsewhere, at least 20 people were believed to have been killed when the spire of the Anglican ChristChurch Cathedral collapsed.

Bishop Jones celebrated Mass at Our Lady of Victories Parish, Sockburn, in suburban Christchurch Feb. 23 for the people of the region recovering from the temblor. He prayed that they might know the love and peace of God in the midst of suffering.

In his homily, Bishop Jones reflected on the nature of evil, but said that an earthquake is in no sense a consequence of, or a punishment for, human behavior.

Father Brian Cummings, provincial superior of the New Zealand province of the Society of Mary, said the presbytery of St. Mary Parish in the northern part of Christchurch was destroyed. No one had lived in the building since it was damaged in September's magnitude 7.1 earthquake, he said.

Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand pledged \$18,800 toward relief and recovery. The funds will support the St. Vincent de Paul Society, Catholic Social Services and other agencies.

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Director Michael Smith said the organization does not normally respond directly to emergencies within New Zealand, but that the scale of the disaster required a response.

The Christchurch earthquake is shaping up as New Zealand's worst natural disaster as the government declared the country's first national emergency. In 1931, a magnitude 7.8 earthquake in Hawke's Bay on the country's North Island killed 256 people.

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